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PROSELYTING THE ASURAS (A NOTE ON RIG VEDA 10. 124)

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THE HYMN RIG VEDA 10. 124¹ has always puzzled scholars and its treatments have been varied. Its difficulties are so unusual that I suggest a new interpretation only with the greatest diffidence.

There seems to be unanimous assent to the theory that it is a dialog containing an invitation from Indra to Agni to leave the Asuras and serve at the sacrifice of the Devas, and an acceptance in reply by Agni. Beyond this point interpretations disagree. I shall not review them all here, but shall mention only such points as bear on my own interpretation.

The first question concerns the Asura *pitṛ* mentioned in vs. 3. This title is usually applied in the Rig Veda to Varuṇa or Dyaus, and might allude to Rudra.² This fact probably more than any other has led many scholars to connect the hymn with the 'Indra-Varuṇa conflict'; and Bergaigne has maintained unhesitatingly and with considerable supporting evidence that here Asura *pitṛ*, Varuṇa, and Vṛtra are one and the same.³ This theory, however, has not been adopted by later scholars, for it requires a strong effort of the will to identify two characters so extremely dissimilar in the Veda as are Varuṇa and Vṛtra. Geldner⁴ thinks that the Asura *pitṛ* is Vṛtra, an opinion rejected by

¹ For a bibliography of this hymn see Oldenberg, *Rgveda. Textkritische und exegetische Noten* 2. 342. Add to it Hillebrandt, *Lieder des Rgveda*, p. 21.

² It hardly seems likely that Varuṇa is meant, since he himself receives an invitation from Indra in vs. 5. Dyaus and Rudra would have no significance here, for neither one of them is so much as alluded to in any other part of the hymn. The suggestion of Rudra offers some allurements in that the Asura *pitṛ* is described as *śivá* (vs. 2), Rudra's prevailing name in later times. Further, Rudra seems to have an 'Asurisch' character in the bad sense of the word (see Segerstedt, *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 57. 174 ff.).

³ *La religion védique*, 3. 145 ff.

⁴ Pischel und Geldner, *Vedische Studien*, 2. 298.

Hillebrandt,⁵ who claims that in the Rig Veda Vṛtra is never an Asura. I cannot see why he should speak so positively, for while Asura is not applied to Vṛtra as an epithet, he surely must concede that even in this hymn Vṛtra is on the side of the Asuras, and that he often falls into a class with the other enemies of Indra some of whom are called Asuras,⁶ while of course in later times he is often an Asura and occasionally appears at the head of the Asuras, as Hillebrandt himself notes. Altho it cannot be positively demonstrated that Asura pitṛ here indicates Vṛtra, there are negative reasons for believing so. If we assign this part to Vṛtra the allusions to Varuṇa by name no longer become so hard to interpret as when we assign it to Varuṇa himself. Nor does the Asura pitṛ then have the colorless and superfluous part in the hymn that he plays if considered to be Dyaus or Rudra.

The story alluded to by the hymn seems to come from a period in Vedic thot when the conflict between the Asuras and the Devas was clearly recognized. Indra, the chief of the Devas, is joined by Agni, Varuṇa, and Soma, who desert the Asuras. Geldner adduces a legend from the Tāittirīya Saṁhita 2. 5. 1 and 2,⁷ which tells how Tvaṣṭṛ, eager to revenge his son Viśvarūpa whom Indra had killed, created Vṛtra by means of a Soma sacrifice. Indra was about to hurl his vājra at Vṛtra, when Agni and Soma, who were within Vṛtra, called to him to stay his hand. Hereupon he invited them to come out of Vṛtra and join his side; and when their defection had been successfully accomplished he slew Vṛtra. This story, I believe, has some points of agreement with the myth referred to in our hymn, but is not the same.

Our hymn appears to me to concern a general conflict between the Devas and the Asuras, not an individual affair of Indra with Vṛtra. These two, however, are leaders of their respective sides.

⁵ *Vedische Mythologie*, 3. 68.

⁶ E. g. Pipru in Rig Veda 10. 138. 3. Indra's enemies, the Adevas, are called Asuras in Rig Veda 8. 85. 9; and the enemies of the Devas are so termed in Rig Veda 10. 53. 4, and 10. 157. 4. Svarbhānu and Namuci, foes of Indra, are described by the adjective *āsurá* in Rig Veda 5. 40. 5 and 9, and 10. 131. 4. See also v. Bradke, *Dyaus Asura*, p. 22.

⁷ *Vedische Studien*, 2. 292 ff.

Agni, Varuṇa, and Soma were Asuras.⁸ In vs. 1 Indra invites Agni to leave the Asura pitṛ (Vṛtra). Agni accepts in vs. 2; whereupon in vs. 3 Varuṇa, too, deserts the Asuras without invitation, and in vs. 4 Soma follows. In vss. 5 and 6 Indra calls encouragingly to Varuṇa and Soma in terms of invitation and reward. In vss. 7, 8, and 9 the singer lauds the results of Indra's superiority and the friendship of those Asuras who have joined the Devas. I now translate the hymn:

1. (Indra, speaking for the Devas:) Come hither, Agni, to this our sacrifice, of five ways, three-fold, and seven-threaded. Be our oblation-bearer, our leader too! Long, too long hast thou lain in darkness.

2. (Agni:) Leaving the Non-Deva⁹ secretly and by hidden ways, as a Deva, foresighted, I go to immortality. When him⁹ (tho) gracious I ungraciously desert, I go from my natural friends¹⁰ to a strange household.¹¹

3. (Varuṇa:) Seeing (that) the guest (i. e. Agni) (is now) of the other branch,¹² I measure out many ordinances of the sacrifice. I say farewell to the Asura Father,¹³ I go from the portion that is without sacrifice to that which has the sacrifice.

4. (Soma:) Many years have I passed within him.¹⁴ (Now) I have chosen Indra and desert the father. Agni, Soma, and

⁸ The character of these gods as Asuras in the benevolent use of the word can be easily seen by glancing at v. Bradke, *Dyaus Asura*, pp. 120-122, and the passages to which reference is made there. This frequent character of benevolent Asuras leads to their temporary association here with the malevolent Asuras.

⁹ The Asura pitṛ, Vṛtra.

¹⁰ The Asuras.

¹¹ The Devas.

¹² That is: seeing that the guest, Agni (átithi is a frequent epithet of Agni), has now gone over to the other branch (the Devas). Agni's changed allegiance means that henceforth the Asuras will be *ayajñīyá* (without sacrifice) and the Devas will be *yajñīya* (with sacrifice). As Dr. Edgerton aptly puts it: Ubi Agnis; ibi yajñás.

¹³ Pitṛ sometimes means protector or guardian (see Grassmann, *Wörterbuch*, s. v. 8). Asura pitṛ may mean only 'Chief Asura,' the head of the Asura forces. This epithet would fit Vṛtra here better than 'father' (*genitor*).

¹⁴ Vṛtra, like Indra, is aided by drinking Soma. See Geldner, *l. c.* p. 299, note 1.

Varuṇa—they fall away (from the side of the Asuras). Rule changes. Therefore I come to aid.

5. (Indra to Varuṇa:) Without magic resources will those Asuras become, if you, Varuṇa, bestow your love on me.¹⁵ Separating the false from the true, O King, come rule my kingdom.

6. (Indra to Soma:) Here has been the light of Heaven: here welfare: here light and the broad mid-air. Let us two kill Vṛtra! Come forth, Soma! You who are yourself oblation we worship with oblation.

7. (Singer:) The wise one by his wisdom has put his mark¹⁶ upon the Heaven; without the use of force Varuṇa made flow the waters. Producing happiness, like wives, these glistening streams carry his color.¹⁶

8. They follow his supreme power (indriyām). He rules them who revel in their native power. Like subjects with loyal allegiance to their king, they have forsaken Vṛtra with loathing.

9. The companion of those full of loathing they have called a swan living in friendship with the Heavenly waters. By their mediation the poets have seen Indra dancing to the anuṣṭubh.

A possible objection to this interpretation may be raised on the grounds that Varuṇa and Soma are pictured as receiving their invitations after they have already come over to the side of Indra and the Devas. This anachronism, however, is not real. Indra's words in vss. 5 and 6 are not to be understood as inducements or bribes to desert the Asuras; rather they are rewards for services already rendered.

¹⁵ The Asuras are great exponents of magic (*māyā*). See Segerstedt, *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 57, p. 178 ff., and Oldenberg, *Religion des Veda*, p. 163. Varuṇa is specifically noted for the use of *māyā*. See Segerstedt, *l. c.* p. 191.

¹⁶ *Rūpā* (form, here translated mark), and *vārṇa* (color) are synonymous in this passage, both meaning distinguishing mark of ownership. Indra's color is perhaps the color of the Aryas in contrast with the color of the Dāsas, which would in that case be ascribed to Vṛtra and the Asuras. Cf. Rig Veda 10. 71. 2, where Soma throws off the *asuryā vārṇa*.